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MRS. DAVENTRY'S REPUTATION

BY

MARGARET PEDLER

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MRS. DAVENTRY'S REPUTATION

MRS. DAVENTRY laid the soft, fluffy powder-puff she had just been using down on the glass-topped toilet-table and, picking up her lipstick, carefully touched her lips, delicately emphasizing their charming contour. Then she tilted the mirror and regarded the result of her labors attentively.

Applied art undoubtedly contributed towards her appearance, although not to any extravagant extent, and it was a distinctly attractive face that looked back at her from the glass—piquantly angled, with a straight little nose and those rather high cheek-bones which somehow seem to enhance the value of the eyes above them. The eyes in question were long and hazel, with tiny specks of black and gold in the iris and, at their outer corners, a faint, artistically drawn line of shadow served to complete anything which Nature might have left to chance in their setting of brow and cheek-bone. Beneath the smart little draped toque, with its single inimitable touch of vivid tangerine, gleamed burnished hair that unmistakably owed a part of its coppery sheen to a judicious application of henna.

Its owner sighed discontentedly.

"And it's all a sheer waste here!" she remarked in heartfelt tones.

Certainly the little Italian lakeside village of Varesina seemed a most inappropriate *mise en scène* for a woman of the type of Cara Daventry. A scattered handful of villas perched above the borders of the mountain-girdled lake,

meandering village streets, primitive and pavementless, but boasting a few desirable shops where cob-webby lace, leather work, and exquisite trifles in frail tortoiseshell were enticingly displayed to tempt the tourist, and one really good hotel—these comprised the whole of Varesina's attractions. At least, from Mrs. Daventry's essentially material standpoint. The tranquil beauty of the place, with its grave, snow-capped mountains, its placid stretch of blue water, broken here and there by tree-crowned islands or by a splash of color as a boat with gayly colored awning drifted by, appealed to her not at all. As she had written to a friend in London: "You can't live exclusively on a beautiful view; at any rate, I can't."

She had happened on the place by accident. An acquaintance who had spent several weeks there in company with a party of friends had painted a glowing picture for her of the manifold delights of Varesina, quite unconsciously discounting the fact that it was the society of kindred spirits equally as much as the picturesque environment which had contributed to her enjoyment, and Mrs. Daventry, alone in an hotel that was now half empty, had been utterly and irretrievably bored since the very day of her arrival.

Still, it was of no use sulking in her bedroom when the sun beckoned her outside, and, selecting by sheer force of habit a sunshade that toned artistically with her frock, she made her way downstairs and strolled through the deserted gardens until she came to the edge of the lake. Here a small jetty jutted out into the water, edged by a low stone wall, and with a flight of steps leading down from it to the water's level. One or two boats, moored at the foot of the steps, lay almost motionless on the still surface, and she paused, glancing towards them uncertainly. Finally, feeling even too listless to attempt a pull on the lake, she unfurled her sunshade and, subsiding on to the wall, sat staring broodingly across at the snow-topped mountains.

It was wonderfully quiet. Hardly a sound broke the warm, reposeful silence, and for a long time she remained absorbed in her thoughts. But presently, gradually piercing her consciousness, came an even, rhythmic sound like the pulse of an engine and, looking up, she saw a motor-boat making its way towards the jetty. There was only one figure in the boat, the lean, athletic figure of a man. His build and the fair, kinky hair which the sunlight turned to gold stamped him as unmistakably English, and instinctively Mrs. Daventry's half-absent gaze quickened to attention. The boat drew nearer, slowed down. It was almost alongside the jetty. A feeling of desperation took possession of her. It seemed ages since she had spoken to a man—a real, live Englishman. Her arm jerked spasmodically, and the next moment her sunshade flew out of her grasp and alighted on the surface of the water, where it bobbed up and down like a big, gayly painted mushroom.

The man in the motor-boat swerved its bows in the sunshade's direction.

"All right," he called. "I'll get it."

Five minutes later he was standing, parasol in hand, at Mrs. Daventry's side.

"It's dripping wet. You'd better let me carry it back to the hotel for you," he said. "You *are* staying there, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm staying there," she answered. "How did you guess?"

"Well, for one thing I saw you coming across the gardens about half an hour ago. And, in any case, there's nowhere else where any one—like you—could possibly be staying."

He smiled, and Cara thought his smile was the most delightful one she had ever seen. It began in his eyes—those very blue eyes of his—and ended crookedly at his mouth, slanting it up whimsically a little to one side. He

was about thirty, she supposed, and devoutly hoped he was unattached.

"How ripping for me!" he exclaimed boyishly, as they strolled towards the hotel together. "I only arrived here this morning, and now, thanks to your sunshade"—he shook it lightly and the drops of water flew from it in a crystal spray—"we shan't need to glare at each other for several days before we dare to make acquaintance."

"It's ripping for me, too," she returned.

"Oh, I expect you've made heaps of friends here already," he said discontentedly.

She laughed outright.

"I should be very clever if I had! The hotel is half empty, and such visitors as there are seem to be mostly American tourists who rush out sight-seeing all day and play bridge all evening, a few Milanese whose principal occupation is fishing in the lake, and one or two English—of the sort who would never make friends without a proper introduction! There goes one of them," she added, nodding rather slightingly in the direction of a tall, angular woman with iron-gray hair and a remarkably high-bridged nose, who was also heading for the hotel, accompanied by a slip of a girl of seventeen.

"Good Lord!" Mrs. Daventry's companion went off into a shout of laughter. "That's my respected aunt, Lady Erskine, with her daughter. I'd no notion they were staying here."

"Oh, I'm sorry——" Cara flushed uncomfortably.

"You needn't be, one little bit," he assured her cheerfully. "We dislike each other as cordially as most relatives. And she's exactly what you've described her—about as friendly as Cleopatra's Needle."

In the lounge he left her and went off dutifully to pay his respects to his aunt, who was waiting regally to greet him before she entered the lift. Cara, watching him shake hands with mother and daughter, was aware of a fleeting,

hostile glance leveled at her from under lowered lids by the elder woman, and surmised that Lady Erskine must have seen her walking with her nephew in the hotel gardens—seen and disapproved.

"Wants him for that bread-and-butter daughter of hers," was Mrs. Daventry's inward comment, and she forthwith mentally proclaimed a state of war. All along she had been conscious of a subdued animosity towards the Erskines, who had somewhat pointedly taken no notice of her since her arrival at the hotel, and now she derived a certain malicious amusement from the fact that her acquaintance with their quite desirable relative obviously afforded them anything but satisfaction.

The man who had rescued her sunshade from a watery grave proved to be even more desirable than she had anticipated. The hotel register declared him to be Sir Roger Heriot, of Heriot's Court, and her knowledge of Debrett was amply sufficient to assure her that he was numbered amongst the most eligible bachelors of the moment.

To Cara Daventry this fact was of enormous significance. Life had not hitherto been particularly kind to her. She possessed nothing beyond the tiny income which she had inherited from her father, and for more years now than she cared to remember she had reënforced it in various little ways that did not bear too close inspection—at least, not from the point of view of the sheltered, cared-for woman whose husband always foots the bills.

Mrs. Daventry had no husband to undertake this very necessary office for her, and it was said that she was not at all averse to allowing other people's husbands—or sons, as the case might be—to atone for this deficiency. "Such jewelery, too, my dear! She never bought it herself; of that you may be sure." This was the kind of whispered gossip that pursued her, and wherever she went, desperately though she might try to keep in with the right people, some one invariably turned up who had known of

her elsewhere, and soon afterwards a certain chilliness in the social atmosphere became apparent, and Mrs. Daventry, as an acquaintance, was gently allowed to "slide."

Latterly, things had grown more difficult than ever; she had even trenched upon her small capital to keep going, and there were occasional moments when sheer terror of the future caught her by the throat. Marriage held out the only hope of salvation, and, owing to that shrewd instinct of distrust which warned vigilant mothers to shepherd their sons determinedly away from her, the prospect of achieving matrimony grew more remote with each succeeding year.

But now, thanks to that happy inspiration regarding her sunshade, a vista of glorious possibilities—such as she had long believed inexorably closed to her—had suddenly opened at her feet. The frank admiration in Roger Heriot's blue eyes assured her of that, and here, in this lonely, romantic spot on the shores of Lake Maggiore, she felt that for once she had a clear field. She had been quick enough to sense Lady Erskine's silent disapprobation, but she did not think the latter would injure her chances much, seeing that Heriot obviously cared precious little for his august relative's opinion. And, in any case, an aunt was a much less difficult proposition than a mother.

Cara plunged into this new campaign with high hopes of success. She and Heriot went out often together on the lake, sometimes in the motor-boat which, as he gayly observed, "effected our first introduction," sometimes in one of the rowing-boats, its cool white awning sheltering them from the blazing sun while Roger pulled leisurely at the oars and Cara lay back against the cushions in the stern, pretending to steer. They played tennis together on the one extremely bad court which was all the hotel boasted, and climbed the mountains, occasionally on foot, but more often by means of the funny little funicular railways

which wound their way up their steep sides. And at last, of course, the inevitable happened.

It was one evening when the moon was sailing through the sky like a great golden globe, and Roger had abruptly suggested a turn on the lake by moonlight.

"Will you come?" he asked, a queer note of urgency in his voice. "It was on the lake we first met." And then Cara guessed why he wanted it, and she agreed a little breathlessly.

Roger, coming out of the hotel a few minutes later with a rug slung over his arm, encountered Lady Erskine.

"You're going on the lake," she said, glancing at the rug rather as though it were an unpleasant species of caterpillar. "I heard you ask that woman to go with you."

He nodded.

"You heard me ask Mrs. Daventry," he returned pleasantly. "Any objection?"

"Every objection. She's a man-hunter, and you're simply walking straight into the net with your eyes blindly shut. You don't know all about her. If you did——" She paused significantly.

"I know all I wish to, thank you," he returned. "Mrs. Daventry has been quite frank. She's told me she's deadly hard up, and"—his voice softening—"I know she is lonely." He smiled straight into Lady Erskine's hard blue eyes. "And we're going on the lake together."

He wheeled round and marched away, and although his aunt, suddenly realizing that matters had gone much further than she had suspected, called to him to come back, he apparently didn't hear her. For a few minutes later she discerned his broad-shouldered figure and Mrs. Daventry's slender one standing side by side on the distant jetty, clearly silhouetted in the moonlight.

"And, darling, do you mind how soon we're married?" said Roger joyously. "Now that we've quite settled that

we love each other and that we could neither of us possibly marry any one else, I don't see any object in waiting."

The motor-boat had long since ceased to hum and lay idly rocking on the water in the middle of the lake, while two quite ridiculously happy people sat in the stern alternately making love and talking nonsense together.

Marriage! Cara lifted her head from Roger's shoulder and sat up suddenly. Why, that was the thing she had been aiming at, striving for, all these weeks, and now, now that she had accomplished her object and Heriot had asked her to be his wife, she had forgotten all about that part of it and remembered only that she loved him. The material side of the matter—the fact that the hand-to-mouth existence she had been living was over and done with, that her future was safe, her position assured—had never once entered her thoughts since the moment Roger had told her that he loved her and she had felt herself respend in every fiber of her being. She had been conscious of nothing except the splendor and glory of their mutual love, and even while now she recognized all that marriage with Heriot would mean to her from a worldly standpoint, she felt illimitably thankful that she had had that one glorious moment of love, free from all material considerations.

"Oh, Roger, I'm so glad, so glad!" she exclaimed impulsively, her voice a little shaken.

"I'm glad, too," he returned, not altogether understanding her, but boyishly exuberant in his new-found joy. "Glader than I can say, sweetheart."

The boat drifted on almost imperceptibly, and at times they talked together and at times let the tender silence of the night enfold them. When they spoke, it was of the wonderful life that would be theirs after they were married, of Heriot's Court, the beautiful old house, dating from the Norman period, which had been the home of the Heriots since the days of William the Conqueror, and in-

sensibly Cara gathered something of the high standards and tradition which Roger, like every Heriot worthy of the name, endeavored to live up to.

"'Truth and my sword,'" said Roger, half-shyly translating for her benefit the old Latin motto of the Heriots. "It's rather nice, isn't it, sweetheart? The kind of clean, straightforward motto a man can grip. My grandfather had it carved across the nursery chimneypiece at Heriot, because he said his children couldn't get used to the idea too soon. And I think he was right. To play the game, and play it straight; that's the main thing."

"'Truth and my sword,'" repeated Cara, and a shadow seemed to fall across her heart. Truth—sheer crystaline truth—did it count so much, then, in Roger's eyes? With an effort she thrust the thought aside, and it was almost a relief when he suggested that they should be turning homeward. She agreed hastily, and sat idly trailing her fingers in the water while he busied himself restarting the motor. He was rather a long time about it, she thought. Once she heard the familiar hum and felt the boat steal forward a yard or two. Then came an irregular knocking and the little vessel seemed to shiver and stand still. Confused sounds issued from the covered-in vicinity of the engine, whither Roger had disappeared into the darkness—the clink of tools picked up and tossed down again, and once a hearty English "Damn!" was wafted up to her. At length Roger himself emerged, hot and rather grimy, his face adorned with a black and oily smudge which ran from brow to chin.

"It's all up!" he remarked succinctly. "That confounded engine's struck work for the night."

"What!" A look of dismay crossed Cara's face. "You don't mean—that the boat won't go?"

"That's just what I do mean," he replied. "She won't budge a yard."

"Then how shall we get back?"

A whimsical smile tilted Heriot's mouth.

"We shan't get back—unless we find another boat to pick us up. And as there doesn't seem to be a craft of any kind within hail, I'm afraid our chances don't look very rosy."

"Do you mean we shall have to stay here all night?" gasped Cara.

She had been caught in one or two not altogether dissimilar scrapes before, thanks to her own want of discretion, and her reputation had suffered a little tarnishing in consequence on each occasion. And now, it seemed too hard that, just as she was on the eve of a new and much more desirable kind of existence, this unlooked-for *contretempts* should arise.

"Aren't there any fishing-boats about?" she queried anxiously, her eyes searching the lake for any glimmer of a distant light. "There usually are."

Roger shook his head.

"To-night seems to be an 'off night' with them," he returned gloomily. "Never mind, darlingest. I'll tuck you up in my coat and the rug, and you'll be all right till the morning. Luckily, it's warm weather."

"You might shout," suggested Cara. "Some one may hear us from the shore."

"I'm afraid we're too far out. And, anyway, I expect the whole of Varesina is sound asleep by this time."

Not to lose any possible chance of rescue, however, he sent his voice lustily across the water again and again. But it produced no result. Apparently the inhabitants of Varesina were too deeply wrapped in slumber to be easily aroused. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to make the best of a bad job, and at last, with the rug drawn well up round her and leaning against Roger's shoulder, Cara fell asleep.

She woke to the sound of voices. It was already daylight and she found that a small fishing craft had pulled

alongside the motor-boat. Heriot explained that he had seen and hailed the fishermen, and that they had agreed to put them ashore and tow the motor-boat back to harbor. Half an hour later, as she and Roger, cold and very hungry, made their way up from the jetty, Cara saw one of the hotel windows go up and a dressing-gown-clad figure paused for a moment at the aperture to stare down at them.

"My reputation will be quite gone," she declared with a rather nervous laugh.

Roger laughed too, and squeezed her arm reassuringly.

"That matters to no one except your future husband," he said masterfully. "And I'm satisfied."

She was conscious of a sudden thrill. It was as though, in those few words, Roger had epitomized the whole altered relationship in which she stood towards the world at large. No longer Mrs. Daventry, of nowhere in particular, a woman whom the safely established members of her own sex regarded with a species of distrust, but the future wife of Heriot of Heriot's Court, with the strong wall of a secure position fencing her round from adverse comment and innuendo. Henceforth *she* was to be one of the sheltered women. It was almost unbelievable, and when she reached the seclusion of her own room she went down on her knees in a passion of gratitude and thanksgiving.

But she had forgotten the dressing-gowned figure at the window. Lady Erskine, watching with scandalized eyes the return of her nephew and Mrs. Daventry in the cold gray light of the early morning, summed up the whole situation in two angry syllables.

"The minx!"

Immediately after breakfast she made a praiseworthy effort to save Heriot from his folly. She listened to his explanation of the night's events with a cynically superior smile.

"Very clever of her indeed," she commented, "to think of tampering with the engine. I suppose she told you she had ruined her reputation?"

Roger's eyes twinkled.

"She did mention the word 'reputation,'" he admitted.

"She would! And of course you think you've got to marry her now?"

"I *am* going to marry her," he returned quietly.

Lady Erskine's eyes narrowed. There was something in Roger's quiet speech which convinced her.

"You can't," she said swiftly. "You can't marry that woman, Roger."

His face set itself in suddenly stern lines.

"Aunt Marion, I can't allow you to adopt that tone regarding my future wife."

"But that's just it. You mustn't *make* her your wife." For once genuine feeling sounded in Lady Erskine's voice. "You can't—you can't put a woman of that sort in your mother's place."

"What do you mean?" She had got through his guard at last with that reference to his sainted, adored mother, the woman who had reigned as a very great lady at Heriot's Court until the day of her death. "What do you mean? You've said either too much or too little. You must explain, please."

"There's very little explanation required. Whatever else she is, that woman is not Mrs. Daventry."

"It's a lie!"

Lady Erskine's thin lips curled.

"Is it?" she said coldly. "Then ask her. Ask her, and find out for yourself."

"I will," he answered. And, wheelng round, he went impulsively in search of Cara.

He found her in a sun-bathed corner of the garden, and as she greeted him with a happy little smile he hated his errand. But he had no thought of evading it.

"Belovedest," he said, standing squarely in front of her, "I've got something perfectly beastly to ask you."

The gravity in his voice sent her heart racing. In an instant she felt that something threatened.

"What—what is it?" she faltered.

"It's nothing, really. Oh, darling, don't look like that—there's no need. It's this: Are you, or are you not, Mrs. Daventry? I know it sounds ridiculous, and I feel a perfect fool asking you such a question. But something's been said—something utterly idiotic—and so I just want you to tell me that you *are* Mrs. Daventry."

In the pause that followed Cara's mind worked with lightning-like rapidity. She had faced bad moments before, but never anything quite so bad as this. Her head drooped a little.

"Suppose—suppose I told you I was not Mrs. Daventry?" she said slowly.

"But you are, you must be!" Roger made a quick step forward, and for the first time fear crept into his eyes. "Cara, what do you mean?"

Suddenly she lifted her head and smiled straight at him. She had come to a decision.

"I don't mean anything very dreadful," she said lightly. "It's only that I'm not married really. I'm Miss Daventry. But as I was traveling alone, I called myself Mrs. because it made things so much easier. A girl traveling alone, you know—oh, don't you understand, Roger? You must."

A great sigh of relief burst from him.

"Yes, of course I understand, darling. But it was a pity you did it. It wasn't a bit necessary, really, and you see how it might give rise to misunderstandings."

"Yes, I see," she answered seriously. "I never thought of it that way. You're—you're not angry, Roger?"

"No, of course not. But I wish you hadn't done it."

"I wish it, too, now, since it displeases you."

"Never mind." He laughed and kissed her. "It's only —don't you see?—'Truth and my sword.' Even in little things it's worth sticking to. Now let's go out and climb mountains, shall we?"

They did not return from their expedition until the evening, and then it was to learn that Lady Erskine had received a wire recalling her to England, and that she and her daughter and maid had hastily packed up their belongings and left Varesina by the afternoon train, so that Roger would be perforce compelled to deny himself until their next meeting the very human satisfaction of proving to his aunt how absurdly she had been making a mountain out of a molehill.

"It's quite a good notion, that of going back to England," he remarked reflectively, when he heard the news of the Erskines' departure.

"Why, haven't you liked it here?" queried Cara. A sudden fear of leaving Varesina swept across her. It was so tranquil, so perfect, here on the shores of the lake, just she and Roger alone together. The thought of returning to England filled her with a queer sort of alarm.

"I've loved it," returned Heriot. "Every minute of it. But I shall love everything in the world better when you're my wife. So let's go back to England and get married, sweetest. Shall we?"

Cara leant back in her corner of the railway carriage and stared absently out of the window at the fields and hedges as they flew past. It was only a week now to the day fixed for her wedding, and she was on her way to Roger's home. He had begged her to run down from London for a day so that they could discuss certain new decorations he was planning to have put in hand whilst they were absent on their honeymoon.

He met her at the station, and waiting outside was the Rolls-Royce, an immaculate footman in livery standing at

the door. Soon they were slipping smoothly along the country road and presently passed a lodge and swept up the long avenue of elms which led to Heriot's Court. A woman at the lodge curtsied respectfully as she swung the gates apart, and when the doors of the stately old house were opened by the butler to admit them, Cara received a fleeting impression of other men-servants waiting in the background.

She gave a little inward gasp as the realization broke upon her that all these things—the stately park, with its beautiful old house, cars, servants, all this environment of ease and luxury, would henceforth be part and parcel of her own life. The contrasting recollection of the past, with its pinchings and scrapings and wretched little makeshifts filled her with a wild desire to laugh.

After lunch, Roger showed her over the place, room after room, each with its note of character, its bit of history. The hall, where ancient suits of armor glinted from dusky corners, and where hung the tattered banners of past days, stained with the blood of Heriots who had died for king and country. Gardens—a riot of gorgeous color—the Italian garden, the Dutch garden, the rosery, each of which had been the special pride and care of one or other bygone generation. And over all that inalienable atmosphere of tradition, of things old and valued and very precious, the suggestion of some hidden spiritual standard to which life in all its aspects was definitely attuned. Cara was vibrantly conscious of it, and it made her feel somehow small and paltry and cheap.

"It's very beautiful—your home, Roger," she said at last.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "I love every stick and stone of it, and all the memories that to me are an integral part of it. I'm not in the least a snob, but there's something in having a long line of brave men and splendid women at your back. It means something. It puts a cer-

tain compulsion on you to live up to what they have been —a duty to a name that has always stood for faith and honor and the things that count."

A name that has always stood for faith and honor! Cara's hand went swiftly up to her throat and she glanced at him with suddenly frightened eyes.

"Does it mean—so much to you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yes," he said simply. "It means everything. It's like a torch that is handed on from one generation to another, and now it's come to my turn. It's up to me to hand that torch on, just as I received it, to my children and to their children after them."

Almost as though she were in a dream she accompanied him to the picture gallery where hung the portraits of dead and gone Heriots. They seemed to look down at her with grave, questioning eyes, as though they asked: "Are you worthy to become one of us, to hand on the torch?"

They paused longest beneath the portrait of Roger's mother.

"She was very wonderful," he said. "I wish you could have known her, belovedest. She would have been so glad to know that you and I had found each other."

A little chill shiver ran through her. He spoke so confidently.

Last of all he took her upstairs into a big room where the gay, jolly wall-paper, with its milkmaids and Cinderellas and big and little bears carried you back to the good days when fairy tales were quite the most real part of life.

"This has always been the nursery," he said. "Look." And he drew her forward so that she could see carved across the high, old-fashioned chimneypiece the Heriot motto.

" 'Truth and my sword,' " he went on. "I grew up with that always before my eyes. And for our children, Cara"—his voice deepened—"it will be there for them, too. We'd want them to play the straight game, darling-

est, to learn from the beginning that that's the only thing that really matters."

Again she felt that slight, chill shiver run through her. It was like the fleeting touch of a steel blade against bare flesh.

"Yes," she answered mechanically. "We'd want them—to play the straight game."

"Why did you send for me? What's wrong, sweetheart?"

The tender eagerness of his tone hurt her incredibly. She knew that after to-day—after she had told him what she had sent for him to tell him—she would never again hear that note in his voice. It had taken her days—or was it years?—to nerve herself to do it, to make up her mind. And yet, dully, subconsciously she thought she must have known all along that she would do this, known it ever since he had spoken of those children—those dream-children of his and hers. "We'd want them to play the straight game." And playing the straight game was sometimes the hardest thing on earth. She knew that, too, now. But she was going to do it, because quite suddenly she found that she couldn't filch from Roger his inheritance, that inheritance of his of a name which had always stood for faith and honor and all that was essentially fine. And if she married him she would rob both him and those dream-children.

In the silence of her little room, high up in the tall gray house in London, she had faced the matter squarely. Deliberately she was going to shut herself out from the splendid, glowing life which would have been hers as Roger's wife—the sheltered, assured life that other women carelessly accepted as their right—and go back to the same old makeshift existence as before, clinging desperately to the fringe of society, cadging—oh, yes, she might as well call the thing by its real name—cadging lunches and

dinners and theater tickets, and even the settlement of overdue dressmakers' bills.

And now Roger was standing in front of her with eager, questioning eyes, waiting to help her, to put right whatever small difficulty might be vexing her. The irony of it!

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

She got it out somehow—the pitiful little story which had been buried more than seven years ago of a man and a woman—a child-woman, hardly out of her teens—and of the sudden reckless flare of passionate love between them; of a runaway match and a marriage that was no marriage at all, because the man already had a wife, and after a few mad weeks of delirious happiness the inevitable bitter ending.

"His wife refused to divorce him. Instead, she offered to take him back, to forgive him. But for me—for me there was no forgiveness." Cara's voice broke, then steadied again. "So, you see, Roger, I can't marry you. I'm not fit—to hand on the torch."

She ceased, and sat with down-bent head and folded hands, waiting, waiting through the tense silence which followed for what must come, the scathing denunciation, the scorn, the anger of a man who felt himself duped.

"Why did you tell me, Cara?"

That was all. Just that one simple question, very quietly uttered.

With an effort she lifted her eyes to his face. But she could not read his expression.

"Why?" Her hands clasped themselves more tightly together. "Because—after I'd been down to Heriot's Court—I knew that it was no good. I couldn't let you marry me. Our future would only have been founded upon a sham. I—I had to play—the straight game."

Again the silence fell. It seemed to Cara like a high wall closing round her. Roger had moved a little away and was standing in the window embrasure, his back

towards her. It was symbolical, she reflected dully—Roger, always with his face turned away from her, now that he knew—now that he knew——

Suddenly he swung round and, coming over to her side, took her in his arms.

"Belovedest," he said, his voice a little roughened, "I'm so glad, so awfully proud you've told me. I hoped you would some day. Because, you see, I knew it all before."

"You knew it?"

"Yes, I've known all about it ever since we came back to England. Dear Aunt Marion was very careful to make sure I should. But it doesn't matter any more. All that matters is the straight game—'Truth and my sword.' And you've played it—magnificently."

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